



Using Partnerships, Collaboration, and a Brownfields Pilot to Revitalize a Community

Shenandoah, VA

Ln Shenandoah, Virginia, a rural community of 2,300 residents, a single abandoned industrial site symbolizes the community's past and is defining its future. The community is coming together around the reuse of the Big Gem site—and Shenandoah's EPA Brownfields Assessment Pilot is assisting through the development of university partnerships, in the adaptation of state community development policy, and by making brownfields redevelopment the cornerstone of a town-wide revitalization strategy. Shenandoah's revitalization effort began with an EPA Brownfields Pilot, and now the town is using more than \$3 million in federal and state environmental, economic development, and transportation funds to renovate vacant storefronts, reconstruct the street scape, build an access road to the nearby Shenandoah River, and establish a small business revolving loan fund. A number of recently enacted local tax incentives and the promotion of Shenandoah as a federal HUB Zone—allowing businesses to compete for special federal contracting opportunities—strengthen the town's position for renewal. These activities complement the commercial, industrial, and recreational uses planned for the Big Gem site.

The Big Gem site was once the location of one of the most prominent iron production facilities in the south. Locals called the large furnace the "Big Gem" because of the brilliant glow that radiated out of the ravine where the foundry and iron facility was located. With the exception of its brief use as a municipal landfill in the 1950s, the Big Gem site remained idle from the 1890s to 1998. It was that year that the Shenandoah Town Council decided to not let the town's limited financial and technical resources preclude it from economic expansion. Town officials recognized that if the community could harness the resources of its nearby, nationally recognized universities, Shenandoah could experience an economic resurgence. Town Councilman Chuck Tomney commented, "Our community just did not have the expertise to embark upon this revitalization effort alone. We've been absolutely blessed by the interests and talents of James Madison University (JMU) as well as the University of Virginia (UVA)."

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A community outreach meeting to provide input regarding reuse plans for Shenandoah, Virginia's Big Gem site.

JUST THE FACTS:

- The Big Gem site was once the location of one of the most prominent iron production facilities in the South, but had sat idle for much of the past century.
- With the exception of its brief use as a municipal landfill in the 1950s, the site essentially sat idle from the 1890s through 1998.
- Graduate students at James Madison University (JMU) identified EPA's Brownfields Pilot program as a potential fit for Shenandoah, leading to an EPA Assessment Pilot award.
- JMU supplied the town government with access to its wide array of technical assistance resources, including graduate students who were eager to gain hands-on economic development experience.

"If three years ago, you would have told me that we would have come this far by talking with local universities and providing internships for students, I might not have believed you. Now, with all the momentum we have created, I don't believe we can possibly fall short of our goal of revitalizing Shenandoah."

***Chuck Tomney, Shenandoah
Town Councilman***

JMU's Office of Economic Development supplied the town government with access to its wide array of technical assistance resources, including graduate students who were eager to gain hands-on economic development experience. The graduate students identified EPA's Brownfields Pilot program as a potential fit for Shenandoah, and JMU's Vice President, Dr. John Noftsinger, and his colleague in the university's economic development office, Liz Knight, agreed. In 1998, the town received a \$200,000 EPA Assessment Pilot award, and at the time was among the smallest communities to receive Pilot status. "It has been a rewarding opportunity," explains Ms. Knight. "Students from various disciplines were able to get real life experience in environmental science, public management, and economic development, and now the town is being revitalized."



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Through EPA's Alternative Dispute Resolution Program, the Pilot used experienced facilitators to design and carry out a number of community input sessions. The facilitators helped town officials, community members, and technical assistance providers organize themselves into the Big Gem Advisory Board. The board is divided into three committees: site planning and design, financing, and community outreach. The efforts of the advisory board are augmented by the Big Gem Resource Group, a collection of officials and technical assistance providers from a number of organizations including the Shenandoah National Park, the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, the Virginia Economic Development Partnership, JMU, the UVA, and private corporations.

Collectively, members of the group have developed a strategic plan that includes a town-wide revitalization strategy and action items for achieving plan goals. The UVA's Landscape Architecture Department conducted its annual design contest at the Big Gem site, generating media attention and a number of green space and economic development ideas for the property and the town's blighted commercial district. The design contest helped Shenandoah identify a number of redevelopment options and economic development concepts, which were then refined and tested by a UVA landscape architecture graduate student and through marketing studies by JMU's School of Business.

The next step involved obtaining the resources to refine planning and begin implementation. Due to its small population, Shenandoah cannot access some of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's redevelopment-related resources such as Section 108 loans, Brownfields Economic Development Initiative grants, and federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds. However, the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (VDHCD) provided the town with a Small Cities CDBG planning grant, recognizing cleanup and redevelopment of the Big Gem site as a critical community development need.

While Brownfields Pilot funds were being used to conduct an environmental assessment of the Big Gem site, VDHCD's planning grant helped the town evaluate the economic development potential of both the Big Gem site and Shenandoah's lone, but deteriorated, commercial district. The outcome of the planning effort was a comprehensive economic development strategy. As funding deadlines

approached, VDHCD was still considering how to adapt its CDBG program to meet the brownfields needs of small communities, and environmental assessment activities at the Big Gem site were not yet completed. To capitalize on the revitalization energy created through the Brownfields Pilot, the town decided to pursue a CDBG grant for the first phase of a comprehensive town revitalization: the revitalization of the town's historic First Street commercial district.

As Shenandoah began redeveloping its commercial district, it communicated with representatives from the VDHCD, helping the state enhance its annual Small Cities CDBG program to address small communities with brownfield issues. VDHCD Associate Director Todd Christensen explains, "Because our CDBG program works with small rural communities, we had not yet had experience in official 'brownfields' projects, but see many economically obsolete properties. We recognized that there are other communities in Virginia like Shenandoah and so we now offer assistance for abandoned sites where there is a community-based plan in place with real economic development and job creation potential." The result is the Virginia Site Redevelopment Program, which provides a grant for site cleanup and a loan for infrastructure and building improvements. "By characterizing it as a brownfield site," Christensen elaborates, "we are able to assist in speculative development that we could otherwise not do through our standard industrial development program."

Developments like these at the state level are helping to align the pieces of the puzzle that will make the Big Gem redevelopment a reality. The Pilot recently held a final outreach meeting to celebrate EPA's approval of the Big Gem's environmental assessment, which determined that no cleanup is necessary. Discussions with private firms who are interested in locating to the town continue, and the advent of a Virginia Site Redevelopment Program creates new opportunities for the Big Gem site just as the revival of the commercial district is accelerating.

The partnerships with prominent universities, collaboration with state officials, and the use of brownfields redevelopment as the centerpiece of Shenandoah's economic development strategy are producing dramatic results. Shenandoah Councilman Tomney explains, "If three years ago, you would have told me that we would have come this far by talking with local universities and providing internships for students, I might not have believed you. Now, with all the momentum we have created, I don't believe we can possibly fall short of our goal of revitalizing Shenandoah."

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